



Postcards from the Edge¹: A Tourist's View of the Key West, Florida, Sea Turtle Fishery

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Key West has long been a center for the Green Turtle fishery in the Caribbean (Ingle and Walton Smith, 1949). Numerous publications have documented the biology, life history, and migration patterns of *Chelonia mydas* throughout the region and subsequent conservation actions, particularly in the publications of Archie Carr and colleagues at the University of Florida (reviewed by Davis, 2007). The Caribbean turtle fishery has been the subject of research and popular articles, books, and novels on the turtles, turtlemen, and cultural importance of the Green Turtle (e.g., Duncan, 1943; Matthiessen, 1975; Nietschmann, 1979; Cruz, 1985; Crawford, 2020), frequently with Key West as the offloading destination of the fishery. Although the Keys population of Green Turtles was quickly depleted, the turtle boats roamed far and wide, particularly to the Miskito Bank and Costa Rica. In 1895 alone, 153,182 kgs of Green Turtle were landed at Key West; the number fluctuated between 81,818 and 288,182 kgs annually from 1880-1897. In 1919, 1,250 Green Turtles were offloaded at Key West estimated at 77,111 kgs (Schroeder, 1924). By the 1940s, the figure dropped to ca. 22,727 kgs annually. However, even in 1970 a total of 190,000 kgs were landed in all of Florida. By then, Green Turtles were on the brink of commercial extinction, and the last turtles were offloaded in Key West in 1971.

Key West was difficult to visit for most tourists, as it was located at the end of the island chain known as the Florida Keys. An overwater rail line completed in 1912 brought affluent tourists, but it wasn't until 1938 that an Overseas Highway was constructed, built along the route of the Overseas Railroad that was destroyed by a highly destructive hurricane in 1935. The road's construction greatly facilitated easy access by less-affluent tourists seeking the sun and relaxed atmosphere of the islands, especially immediately after World War II and in the decades following the war. Tourism boomed from the 1950s to the 1960s as access and affluence increased, and visitors were eager to record their

visits through colorful postcards sent to friends back home. One of the unusual attractions of Key West was the unloading of sea turtles at the turtle kraals (Fig. 1A), and postcards dutifully recorded these events².

Most postcards from the Key West turtle fishery depict scenes associated with the Turtle Kraals. The first cannery in Key West was opened in 1849 by Armand Granday and continued successfully until about 1890. In 1910, the cannery was purchased by Norman Thompson, who made turtle soup until 1957. The kraals then were purchased by Sea Farm and operated until the early 1970s when depleted stocks and legislation ended the sea turtle trade. In 1971, Florida banned the harvest of Green Turtles measuring less than 41 inches (ca. 1.04 m) in the Florida Keys, and in 1973, the State legislature passed a resolution urging the federal government to seek international agreements for the protection of Green Turtles. Green Turtles were added to protection under provisions of the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973, and the trade in Green Turtles at Key West was prohibited.

In 1994, Key West's historic turtle soup cannery buildings and pens (the Turtle Kraals) were added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The old original building collapsed in 1995 and was reconstructed in 1998. For a short while, Turtle Kraals housed a private museum dedicated to raising awareness of the plight of these fascinating reptiles and to the need for their conservation (Fig. 1B). In 2000, the Mel Fisher Maritime Historical Society conducted extensive archeological research in the old turtle pens and recovered many artifacts from the era of turtle fishing. Currently, the

¹ This reference is explained by Nietschmann (1979). It refers to the narrow interface between the land and sea throughout the Caribbean and its islands, particularly among its resident communities and their local natural resources. In this paper, I include "postcards" to include stereoview cards and decals depicting sea turtles prior to state and federal protection in the early 1970s.

² The first postcard copyrights in the United States were issued in 1861, although earlier examples (1848) exist. However, postcards did not become popular in the United States until the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Before 1898 in the United States, only the government could use the word 'post card.' Other cards were marked as 'souvenir,' 'mail,' or 'correspondence' cards. Particular styles can be helpful to date the cards (see footnote 3): Private Mailing Cards (1898–1901), Undivided Back Post Cards/Postcards (1901–1907), White Border Era (1915–1930), Linen Era (1930–1945, but some as late as the 1960s), Photochrome Era (1939–Present). The United States Post Office did not permit writing on the address side of a post card until 1907. In addition to commercial photographs, other styles of photographs as well as line drawings have been used to illustrate the sea turtle industry centered around Key West, Florida. Reviews of the history of postcards are provided by Willoughby (1992) and Pyne (2021).



Figs. 1A-B. Left: leaflet promoting tourism at Turtle Kraals in the 1950s. Right: brochure promoting the Turtle Kraals Museum in the late 1990s. Boat captain and turtle conservationist Tina Brown oversaw the museum in 1999 during the author's visit. Author's collection.

Key West Turtle Cannery and Kraals is operated as a museum by the [Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society](#).

In the images that follow [all from the author's collection], I present a large series of postcards that I have assembled after about 35 years of searching through antique stores and on the internet. Initially, postcards depicted turtle fishing as an unusual industry conducted by people living on the Caribbean Edge, an exotic occupation to most non-Caribbean people. In the 1950s to 1960s, however, the emphasis shifted to providing souvenirs for casual visitors³. Looking at them now with the smiling tourists, busy workers, and helpless turtles, biologists and historians are provided with a snapshot of how people of that era saw these vulnerable creatures not as sentient animals, but as "things" of commerce,

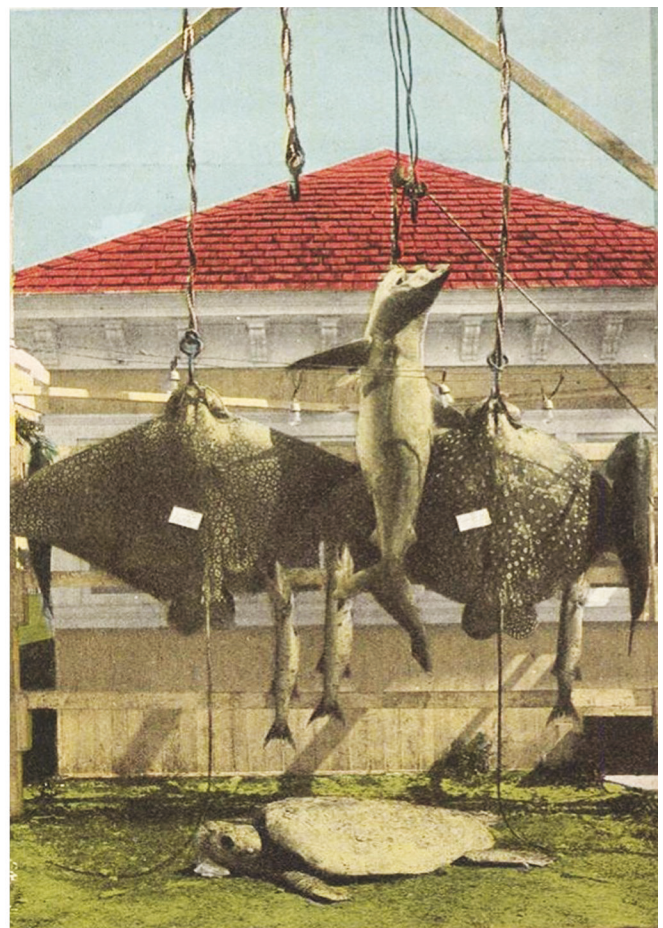
amusement, and entertainment in a world without limits. Fortunately, today's sea turtle postcards primarily focus on the beauty and grace of the animal rather than exploitation. This shift occurred rapidly on the heels of a conservation movement that was instrumental in reshaping exploitive concepts of resource use. The postcards and other tourist-related ephemera mirror the change in the public view, from

³ Aside from style, postcards can be difficult to date unless mailed with a postmark, as older images were frequently reissued on later cards. Some of them say "place stamp here" in the upper right corner on the blank side, but a few give a postage amount (e.g., "place 1¢ stamp here"). However, 1¢ stamps were used on postcards from 1898-1917, 1919-1925, and 1928-1951, thus providing few clues as to when the postcard was issued or sent.

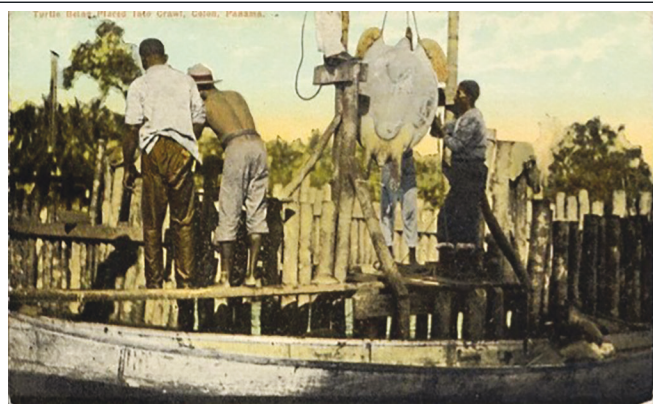
Green Turtles as limitless resources and the gifts of divine providence to recognizing ecosystems, species, and even individual animals as vulnerable and deserving protection. Fortunately, Green Turtles have made a remarkable recovery in Florida from the early 1980s (Dodd, 1982) to the late 2010s and are once again thriving in the waters off Key West (Herren et al., 2018).

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Figs. 2A–B. Sea Turtles apparently were considered “sport” for tourists early on. In some cases, Loggerhead Turtles (*Caretta caretta*) were depicted as catch on early postcards, as they were more commonly encountered than Green Turtles throughout Florida waters. The oldest postcard I have depicting sea turtles as catch dates from 1901 to 1907 (left). A similar card is undated but is likely from that era (right).



Figs. 3A–B. Turtle kraals were used in the Caribbean to house turtles before shipment to Key West. Left: this card is dated 1916 from the Panama Canal Zone. Right: Cayman Islands 1917 postcard of turtles being offloaded to larger boat for transport to Key West.



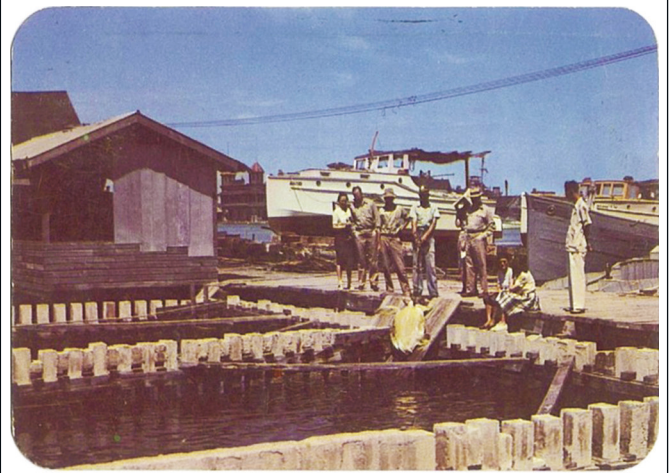
TURTLE CATCH, KEY WEST, FLA.

Unloading Green Turtles at Key West, Fla.—2

1027



Figs. 4A–C. The oldest sea turtle postcard from Key West that I can reliably date is from 1915, although I have seen the same card with a 1928 postmark (top). Note that older cards were reissued into the 1950s and 1960s. The white border of the middle and lower cards may date these cards to prior to 1930.



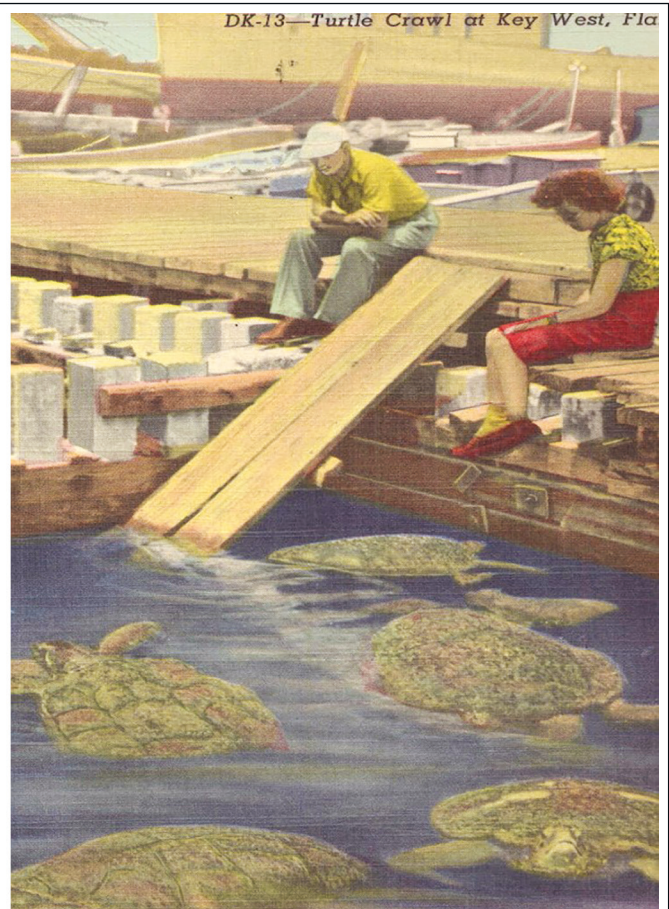
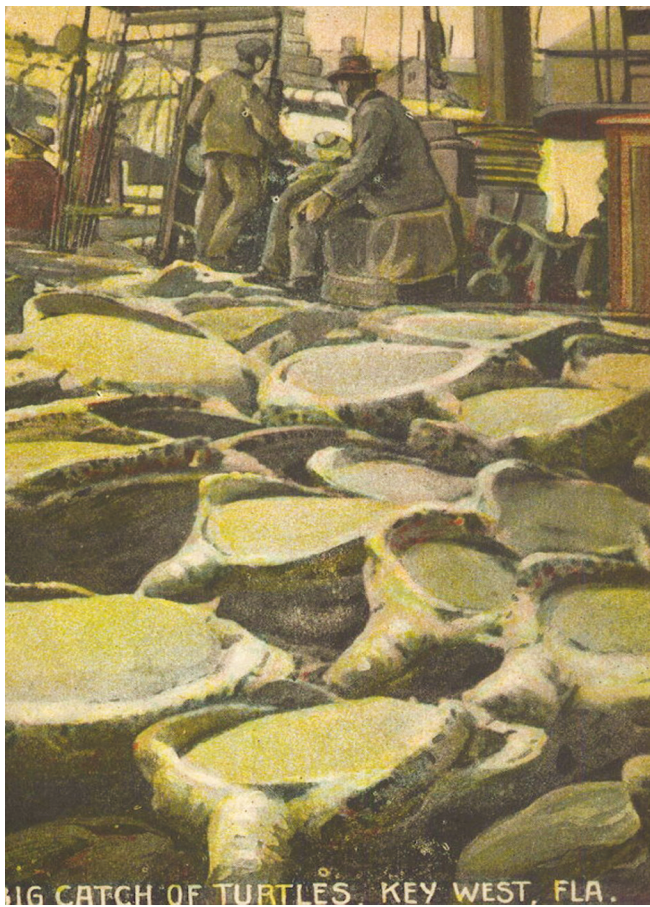
NAVIGATING BY C. P. ALLEN



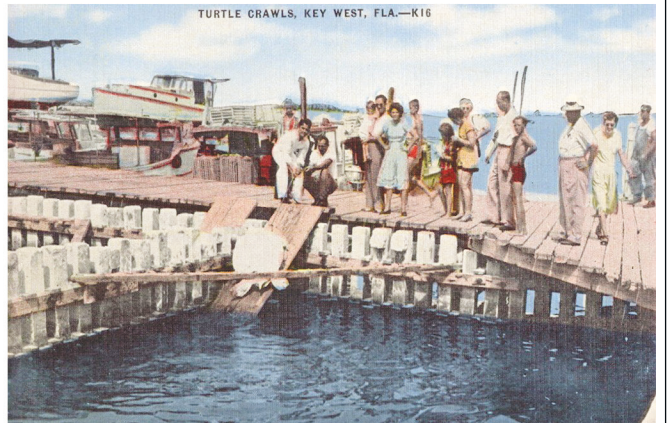
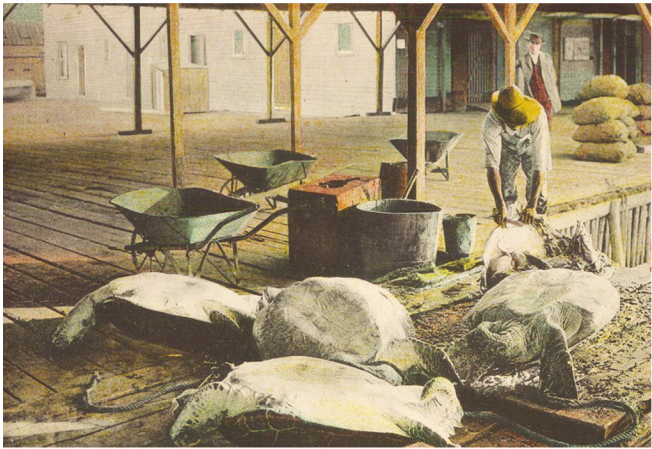
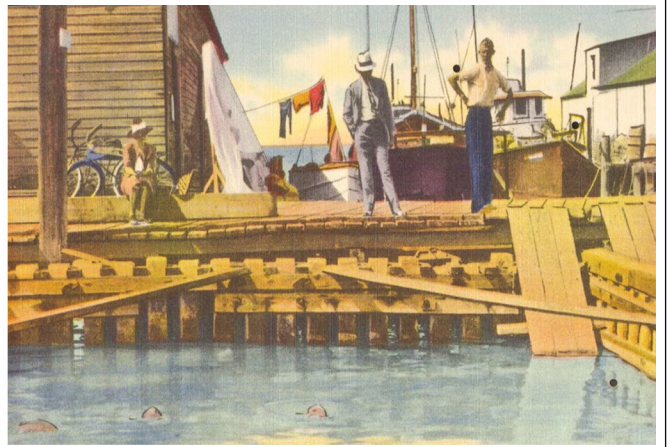
Figs. 5A–B. Postcards frequently had different configurations, such as rounded versus square corners. The card on the top is dated 1952.



Fig. 6. Occasionally publishers enhanced their cards, such as by inserting a giant tortoise into the unloading scene. From this lateral view, the tortoise's shell does not match the scute pattern of either the Galapagos or Aldabra species.



Figs. 7A-B. Many cards focused on the unloading of turtles at the dock. The clothing, boats, and backgrounds may suggest an era depicted, but the postcard itself may not date to the scene portrayed.



Figs. 7C-H. Many cards focused on the unloading of turtles at the dock. The clothing, boats, and backgrounds may suggest an era depicted, but the postcard itself may not date to the scene portrayed. Top left: 1954; bottom left: 1955; bottom right: 1954 (linen); other cards undated.



Photo: E. Ludwig, John Hinde Studios.

Figs. 8A-F. Happy families and smiling individuals were frequently displayed with the doomed turtles in the 1950s and 1960s. The scenes are ones of participation and entertainment. None of these cards are dated.

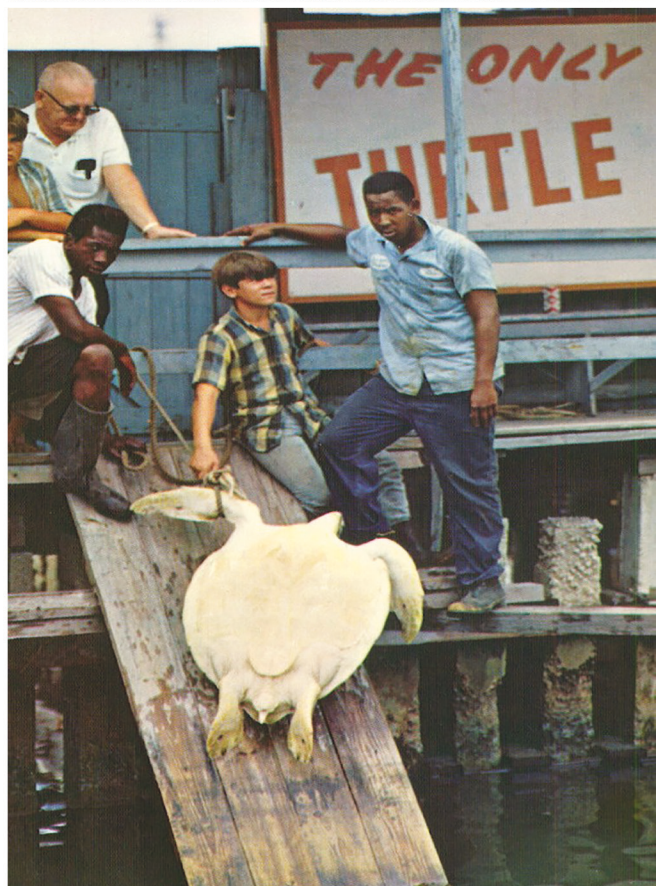
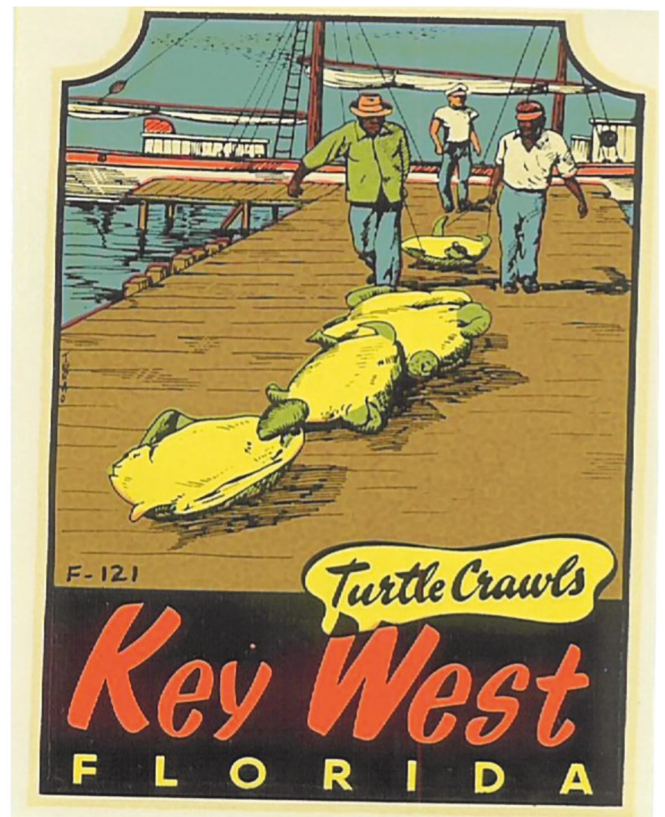
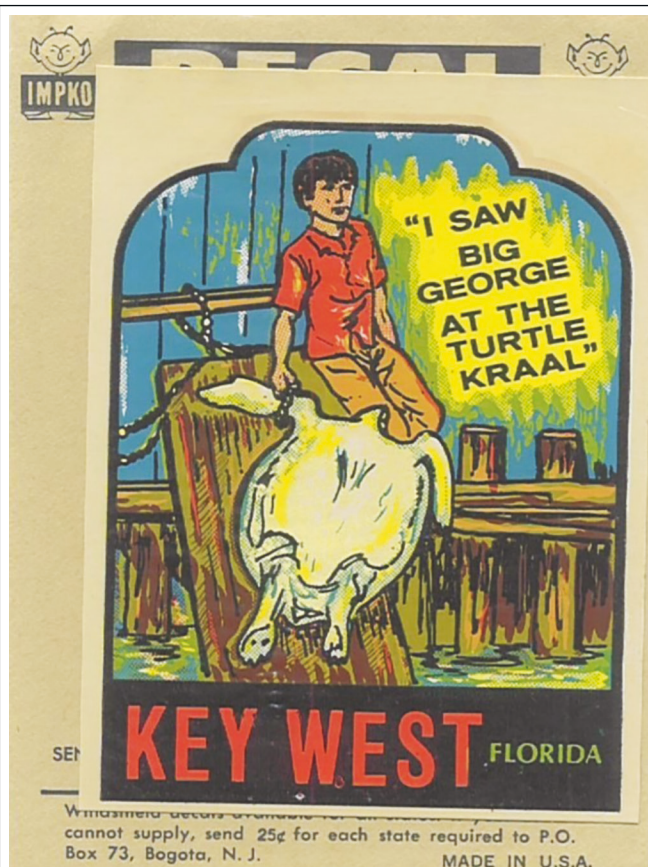




Fig. 9. Polished shells on display. 1950. Meat, soup, and shells were available for purchase.



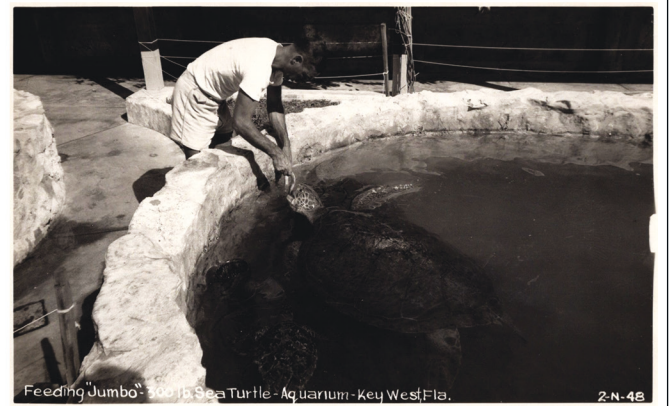
Fig. 10. Sampling local cuisine. This advertisement postcard dates from 1941. Green turtles were often featured in local restaurants. At the Coral Grill on Islamorada, Green Turtle steak sold for \$2.95 and sandwiches for \$1.25 [these prices are from a menu in the 1960s, exact date unknown]



Figs. 11A-B. “Luggage” decals were popular in the late 1950s to early 1960s.



Figs. 12A-B. Stereoview cards were especially popular from 1870 to 1920. Top: this stereo card was published by the George W. Griffith Company of Philadelphia and was issued as part of the 1903 series. Some of these cards are colored to various degrees. Bottom: a second card was published by the Keystone View Company of Meadville, Pennsylvania. By 1905, Keystone View was the world's largest stereographic company.

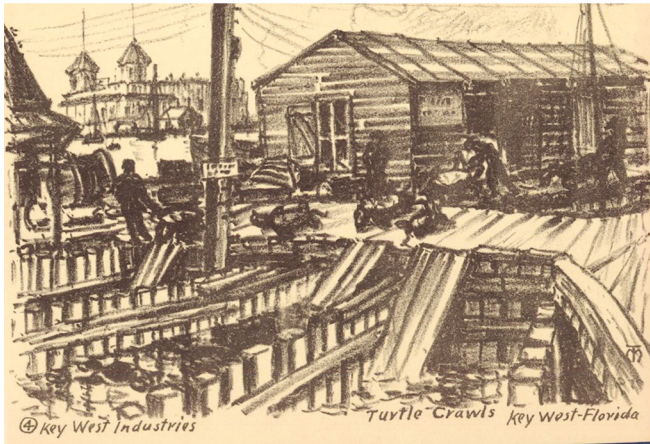


Figs. 13A-D. Other postcard depictions of sea turtles were frequently included with a south Florida visit. Top left: turning turtles on the beach; top right: digging up nests; bottom: visiting aquariums, for example, the Key West Municipal Aquarium (1955, left).



Conch Town Trolley - Key West, Florida

Color by Bruce Milley



Figs. 14A-C. Postcards sometimes featured depictions of tours and, more recently, photos or illustrations of the historic kraals.

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